

A new pope's call to unity

I was in the second row for Pope Leo's installation. I am cautiously optimistic about what I heard.

by [Jeannine Marie Pitas](#)

July 14, 2025



Pope Leo XIV in the popemobile at his inaugural mass at the Vatican, on May 18, 2025. (Photo by Freddie Everett / US Department of State)

My alarm rings at 3 a.m. I jump out of bed eagerly, still feeling the effects of jet lag but excited for the once-in-a-lifetime experience that awaits me. Ten days after the

white smoke appeared above the Vatican, I am about to see Pope Leo XIV's inauguration mass.

I've just arrived in Rome as faculty for a month-long summer program for students at the Catholic liberal arts college where I teach. I'm leading a seminar on Virgil's *Aeneid* and auditing the other classes, which include a historical study of Galileo and an art history course that will use Rome's many churches and museums as a classroom. This is my second visit to Rome but my first time taking in the overwhelming amount of art and history in the Eternal City.

I meet my students in the lobby of Sant'Anselmo, the Benedictine abbey where we are staying, and follow them on a dark walk along the Tiber River. After passing through two layers of Vatican security, we are amazed to have second-row seats to see Leo officially installed as the successor to St. Peter. Around me, the crowd grows. People are waving flags from Ukraine, Nigeria, Chile, India, and so many other countries.

This flag-waving is no display of jingoistic nationalism; it's a celebration of the unity within diversity that is a hallmark of the Catholic Church, a gesture of solidarity with the global church around the world. One of Catholicism's most compelling aspects to me is that schism isn't permitted. Each celebration of the mass is an attempt at connection across a very crowded table. No matter how vehemently we disagree, we are compelled to recognize our shared humanity and dignity.

While beautiful in theory, this unity is not without problems. Watching political leaders file in for the inaugural mass, I see that US vice president J. D. Vance, a convert whom Vatican officials have [repeatedly rebuked](#) for his support of mass deportations of immigrants, is in attendance. So is Dina Boluarte, the controversial president of Peru, who has been [widely criticized](#) for using police and armed forces against protesters. [Experts have described](#) her government as illiberal and authoritarian.

While waiting for the mass to begin, I meet a Peruvian woman, living in Germany, who holds up a sign protesting the government and fills me in on the reasons for her country's [ongoing political crisis](#). When we get up to use the bathroom, I am stunned to find both of us being gently but firmly escorted away by Vatican police, who take us to a side room for questioning. (While I, not an Italian speaker, probably should just switch to English, my use of Spanish leads them to conclude that I'm Peruvian,

too.) After questioning her intentions, which she insists are peaceful, they explain that the installation mass is meant as a neutral space where political statements are not permitted.

On the one hand, I understand why. The solemn ceremony of a papal installation is a time to come together as one. Surely the Vatican officials would have intervened similarly if I'd come with any Trump or Vance-related paraphernalia, whether positive or negative. But the requirement that we put our politics aside is itself undoubtedly a political decision. My new acquaintance is doing nothing more than urging the new pope, a naturalized Peruvian citizen whom she respects, to hold her government accountable.

As she surrenders her sign to the guards (who assure her she can pick it up at the mass's end), I can't help but feel like she and I, both middle-aged women, have reverted to our childhoods: we are two Catholic elementary school students caught with some forbidden amusement, which our teacher confiscated. *You can have it back at the end of the day.*

As security escorts us back to our seats, my new friend and I are forced to acknowledge the Catholic Church's repressive side. And yet we also love its commitment to living the gospel message, particularly among the world's poorest. We love the liturgical beauty and the long tradition of mystical spirituality at its core.

When the mass begins, flags are put away, and we all join the choir in song. The mass is in Latin and Italian, but the readings and prayers are recited in Arabic, Mandarin, Polish, and Greek, the language of the Church's Eastern rite. I am aware that while the 200,000 people present may not be likeminded in all things, we are united in our love of Christ. Following in Pope Francis's footsteps, Leo has placed Christ's unifying love at the center of his message.

After the gospel reading on the call of Peter, the new pope [reminds us](#) of the mission Jesus entrusted to his complicated apostle—and by extension, to all Christians:

Peter is thus entrusted with the task of “loving more” and giving his life for the flock. The ministry of Peter is distinguished precisely by this self-sacrificing love, because the Church of Rome presides in charity, and its true authority is the charity of Christ. It is never a question of capturing others by force, by religious propaganda or by means of power. Instead, it

is always and only a question of loving as Jesus did.

He goes on to describe the mission of dialogue and peacebuilding so central to the life of all Christians, no matter what divisions have plagued us throughout history:

In this our time, we still see too much discord, too many wounds caused by hatred, violence, prejudice, the fear of difference, and an economic paradigm that exploits the earth's resources and marginalizes the poorest. For our part, we want to be a small leaven of unity, communion, and fraternity within the world. We want to say to the world, with humility and joy: Look to Christ! Come closer to him! Welcome his word that enlightens and consoles! Listen to his offer of love and become his one family: in the one Christ, we are one. This is the path to follow together, among ourselves but also with our sister Christian churches, with those who follow other religious paths, with those who are searching for God, with all women and men of good will, in order to build a new world where peace reigns.

Hearing these words, I'm grateful for the message of solidarity not only with Catholics but with all Christians, followers of other faiths, and people of good will everywhere. Catholics believe that every pope follows in the footsteps of Peter, a deeply flawed man who awkwardly misunderstood Jesus on many occasions, who fell asleep while Jesus was praying at Gethsemane, who denied knowing him three times on the night of his betrayal. And yet, this deeply flawed character is the rock on which the church is built. Peter is someone we are all called to emulate, proof that God can draw courage out of cowardice and steadfastness out of weakness.

The expectations are high for this new successor of Peter. While his papacy is very young, he is already speaking out on the most devastating issues of our time, urging us to stop the "[third world war in pieces](#)" and drawing on his namesake Pope Leo XIII's [legacy](#) to affirm human dignity in this age [of artificial intelligence](#). He also seems to live the unity he preaches. In nearly the same breath, he quotes his [two most recent predecessors](#), Benedict and Francis, who, while often reductively contrasted with each other as conservative and progressive, [shared more similarities than differences](#).

I am not without concerns about this pope, particularly around [allegations that he mishandled sexual abuse cases](#). I hope that he will prove to be a [strong advocate for](#)

[victims](#), refusing to minimize the lasting impact of the Catholic Church's greatest wrong. I also do not expect him to advocate for the position of [women](#) and [LGBTQ](#) people in the Church; thus far, on those issues, he appears to be affirming the status quo.

But I'm cautiously optimistic as I learn more about his focus on peacebuilding and dialogue. His papal motto is "In Illo Uno Unum" (in the One, we are one). I've spent the last several years studying ways that Christianity might respond to [the ever-deepening political divide in the US](#), and I am hopeful that this emphasis on unity might serve as an antidote to the inflammatory rhetoric, nationalism, and polarization growing in many parts of the world.

On Pentecost Sunday, I head back to St. Peter's Square. This mass is smaller than the installation, but the mood is the same. Pope Leo drives in an open car through a crowd waving flags from all corners of the world. I take note of a banner with an image of a dove flying over the earth. A group behind me holds up letters spelling "Shalom." Parents hold up their babies for a papal blessing, which he eagerly offers.

When the multilingual mass begins, we hear the message of Pentecost, the scriptural antidote to the Tower of Babel—the moment when, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' disciples make themselves understood across cultures and languages.

As I write these words, I am dismayed to learn of the escalating unrest in the US, sparked by President Trump's inhumane immigration policies as well as his erratic foreign policy decisions. Part of me is eager to go home to be in solidarity with my immigrant friends. But it occurs to me that being on pilgrimage in Rome at this historic moment is perhaps the best form of solidarity I can offer, a way to summon my strength for the undoubtedly challenging times that lie ahead.

In his Pentecost homily, Leo said, "May the strong wind of the Spirit come upon us and within us, open the borders of our hearts, grant us the grace of encounter with God, enlarge the horizons of our love, and sustain our efforts to build a world in which peace reigns."

There was a time when I, influenced by the long shadow of post-Enlightenment secularism, felt that Christianity had little to offer the modern world. Now, looking at the massive divisions in our society, I have come to believe that Jesus' message of love, honesty, and peacemaking may be the only thing that can heal us. Walking

around Rome, I think of how these teachings have survived thousands of years of persecution, an empire's decline, plagues, wars. I hope that Leo will be a light in these dark times.